Sustaining Community-based Programs: 
Examination of Relationships Between Sustainability Factors and Program Results

Jay A. Mancini, Ph.D. and Lydia I. Marek, Ph.D. 
Department of Human Development 
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University 
Blacksburg, VA 24061 
(540) 231-9816 (office) 
(540) 231-7012 (fax) 
mancini@vt.edu 
lmarek@vt.edu

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Abstract

A conceptual framework for evaluating community-based program sustainability is presented, and the empirical focus of the study is on the relationship between 7 sustainability elements (leadership competence, effective collaboration, understanding the community, demonstrating program results, strategic funding, staff involvement and integration, and program responsivity) and 3 middle range program results (meeting needs of at risk families, planning for program sustainability, and having confidence in project survival). Three samples of program professionals are surveyed about their perceptions of their programs (N=243, 58, and 55). Findings suggest all sustainability elements to some degree are related to these program results, with effective collaboration and program responsivity being relatively less important. Because there are many elements that contribute to aspects of sustainability, planning for sustainability can be targeted in particular areas. This program sustainability framework lends itself for use with community groups composed of program professionals, evaluators, and other stakeholders. Our empirical results suggest that middle range program results are affected by sustainability elements, which in turn are amenable to manipulation.
Introduction

Community-based programs are important in the service delivery system in many communities and both public and private agencies provide resources to initiate and maintain such programs. Yet a persistent gap in understanding program processes is the lack of knowledge about how programs are sustained (Lerner, 1995). The significance of sustaining programs was expressed by a service provider who said, “We have a responsibility to our program recipients; they’ve had so many losses in their lives and for us to come in for a year or two or three and give them hope, only to have the program go away, we’ve just caused another loss and a further loss of hope in their lives” (Akerlund, 2000, p. 353).

Purpose and Objectives

The focus of this presentation is to examine the relationships between elements of a program sustainability conceptual framework and these important middle range program results: meeting needs of at risk families, confidence in community-based program survival, and the timing of planning for sustainability.

Theoretical Base

There are three main sections in our logic model: elements that are assumed to lead to sustainability, middle range program results, and an ultimate result of the program being sustained (Figure 1). We assume that the sustainability elements lead to a set of desired middle range program results, and it is also assumed that these, in turn, increase the chances of a program being sustained (ultimate result). It is also assumed that these middle range program results are directly related to the ultimate sustainability result. We also recognize that the sustainability elements may be directly related to the ultimate result of a program being sustained. Vectors in Figure 1 indicate those plausible relationships. We currently examine the linkages between sustainability elements and selected middle range program results.
Defining Sustainability

Sustainability is the power or the capacity of programs to continuously respond to identified community issues. A sustained program maintains a focus consonant with its original goals and objectives, including the individuals, families, and communities it was originally intended to serve. Within our definition are several facets, including the intensity and level of programs and services that are offered and the flexibility a program demonstrates with regard to specific services and programs. The key element of sustainability in our view is retaining the original goal(s), in our case, supporting at risk children, youth, and families by providing continued benefits, regardless of the particular activities that are delivered or the format (institutionalization versus independence) in which they are delivered. It is more important to sustain benefits to families and communities than to sustain program activities per se.

Elements of Sustainability

The literature contains a number of perspectives on what is associated with sustainability, which we term elements of sustainability. Our conceptualization is informed by our research program begun in 1996 on community-based programs for at risk children, youth, and families (Mancini & Marek, 2003; Mancini & Marek, 1998; Marek, Mancini, & Brock, 1999).

Our framework contains seven major elements of sustainability: leadership competence, effective collaboration, understanding the community, demonstrating program results, strategic funding, staff involvement and integration, and program responsivity.

Leadership Competence is the ability of leaders to establish goals, to develop clear plans for program development, implementation, evaluation, and to be active in meeting...
those goals and managing those plans (Akerlund, 2000; Blythe, Tracy, Kotovsky, & Gwatkin, 1992; Bossert, 1990; The Finance Project, 2002).

**Effective Collaboration** pertains to the identification of relevant stakeholders who understand and support program goals, who have clearly identified roles and responsibilities, and who are actively involved in meeting program goals (Goodman & Steckler, 1989a, 1989b; Steckler & Goodman, 1989; Altman, Endres, Linzer, Lorig, Howard-Pitney, & Rogers, 1991; O’Loughlin, Renaud, Richard, & Paradis, 1998; Ponzio, Peterson, Miller, & Kinney, 1994).

**Understanding the Community** entails having knowledge of community needs and resources, having respect for community members, and involving key community members in programs (Altman, et al, 1991; Mancini & Marek, 2003; Holder & Moore, 2000; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Pentz, 2000; Laken & Hutchins, 1995).

**Demonstrating Program Results** is the evaluation of program processes and outcomes using acceptable research methods, and informing stakeholders of the results of those evaluations (Mancini, Marek, Byrne, & Huebner, in press; O’Laughlin et al, 1998; The Finance Project, 2002; Holder & Moore, 2000; Laken & Hutchins, 1995).

**Strategic Funding** includes having plans and resources in place to support current program requirements as well as to ensure sufficient future fiscal support to meet ongoing program goals. The need to be intentional and plan for continued funding includes an analysis of short-term and long-term funding needs, developing a range of financing options, and recognizing that program sustainability is enhanced when there is diversity in the forms of support and the origins of support (Akerlund, 2000; The Finance Project, 2002; Laken & Hutchins, 1995; Holder & Moore, 2000; Pentz, 2000).

**Staff Involvement and Integration** is the inclusion of committed, qualified staff in program design, implementation, evaluation, and decision-making. Supporting a program’s mission and vision occurs more readily when staff feel that they are important components in the organization, and in effect, make the organization their own (Holder & Moore, 2000; O’Laughlin et al., 1998).

**Program Responsivity** is the ability of a project to adapt programming to meet changing community needs. Program responsivity is essential because of change that is inherent in communities (Bamberger & Cheema, 1990; Goodman & Steckler, 1989a; The Finance Project, 2002; Holder & Moore, 2000; Laken & Hutchins, 1995).

**Middle Range Program Results**

In our model we include middle range program results, those that may be intermediate to a program actually being sustained. These results are closely aligned with a program being sustained but since they are not end points, in some respects they are objectives (short term) rather than goals (long term). In this study we have assessed these middle range program results: continuing to provide and focus on the original program goals (in our case, meeting the needs of at risk children, youth, and families), planning for sustainability, and having confidence in project survival. We do not see these as the only viable middle range program results, but they are examples of results that may be closely associated with the ultimate sustainability of a program.
Ultimate Result: A Sustained Program

Whether or not a program is sustained is the ultimate outcome in our model. We have already noted our assumptions about how ultimate sustainability may be related to the sustainability elements, and to the middle range program results. It is important to clarify exactly what sustainability means and how it is measured. For example, Goodman and associates (1993) found that number of years of existence in the organization was related to a program becoming part of the organizational routines but unrelated to whether or not the program was functioning to full capacity. In the former case it might be concluded that a program was sustained but in the latter case it would not be considered sustained. In our approach, either sustainability elements or middle range program results may be directly related to the ultimate sustainability result. What is ultimately important is whether a program is sustaining benefits to families and communities.

Methods, Procedures, and Data Sources

We use three samples to examine the relationships between the sustainability elements and the three middle range program results. Data from sample 1 (N=243) were collected in the spring of 2001 at an annual meeting of USDA’s Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Initiative. Human development and family life professionals who work at local, regional, and national levels of program development and evaluation voluntarily completed a structured survey. Sample 2 data were collected in 2002 with staff of 58 community-based programs that were funded under USDA’s Youth at Risk Program Initiative. Study 3 data were collected in 2003 with staff of 55 community-based programs that were funded under USDA’s State Strengthening Program Initiative.

Measurement

The Program Sustainability Index (PSI) is used to assess sustainability elements, and includes 53 items. Items are grouped in the seven conceptual framework elements as follows (number of items in parentheses): Leadership competence (7), Effective collaboration (12), Understanding the community (9), Demonstrating program results (7), Strategic funding (5), Staff involvement and integration (10), and Program responsivity (3). These seven elements were determined through a series of earlier studies wherein interviews were held with over 100 community program personnel between 1996 and 1998. The results informed a survey that focused on a wide variety of areas thought to influence sustainability; it was implemented from 1999 through 2003 to program personnel from 153 active projects across the United States and its territories. Further, in 1998 over 4,000 program professionals who participated in a study of organizational change were asked to define program sustainability and then to indicate their view on key elements of sustainability (Betts, Peterson, Marczak, & Richmond, 2001). Based on these qualitative and quantitative studies, seven elements were identified as consistently contributing to program sustainability. Please contact us for additional information on the PSI.

Three middle range program results items were included in all three studies. The first question asked, “To what extent does this project’s current programming meet the needs of at risk children, youth, and families?” Response choices were “Not at all”, “Somewhat”,

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“Moderately”, and “Fully”. Given the program affiliations of the respondents, asking about meeting needs of at risk children, youth, and families is an important aspect of whether a program is targeting an appropriate community audience and fulfilling the original goal(s) for the program. A second question asked, “When did program leaders begin actively planning for this project’s survival (post-funding)?” Response choices were: during the initial program proposal phase, during the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth year of funding, and after the initial funding period had ended. We assume that the timing of sustainability planning is an important aspect of whether sustainability actually occurs, and that planning is related to sustainability elements such as leadership competence, strategic funding, and so on. The third question asked, “How confident are you that your project will still be active in five years?” Response choices were “Not at all”, “Somewhat”, and “Very confident”. Our assumption is that being confident in the future of a program is affected by such elements as effective collaboration, demonstrating program results, and so on, and may be a precursor of ultimate sustainability because this confidence is grounded in what is actually happening with a program.

Results

Our examination of the relationships between the sustainability elements and the middle range program outcomes is addressed by using bi-variate correlations (one-tailed test of significance). Correlation effect sizes range from .02 to .48, with most being moderate; 60% of the correlations are statistically significant (Table 1). Leadership Competence and Understanding the Community correlate most frequently with the three program results (for example, meeting at-risk needs), and Effective Collaboration and Program Responsivity correlate least frequently. Across the 3 studies, there is concurrence with regard to (1) the relationships that Leadership Competence, Strategic Funding, and Staff Involvement and Integration have with having confidence in program survival, (2) the relationships that Leadership Competence and Understanding the Community have with planning earlier for sustainability, and (3) the relationship that Demonstrating Program Results has with meeting needs of at-risk families. Higher scores on these sustainability factors are associated with meeting at-risk needs, with having confidence in the future of the program, and with focusing on sustainability planning.
Table 1. Correlations between Sustainability Factors and Program Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Meeting At-Risk Needs</th>
<th>Planning Process</th>
<th>Confidence in Program Survival</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Competence</td>
<td>18**</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Collaboration</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the Community</td>
<td>29**</td>
<td>31*</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating Program Results</td>
<td>22**</td>
<td>32*</td>
<td>23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Funding</td>
<td>17**</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff Involvement and Integration</td>
<td>19**</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Responsivity</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*p < .05. **p < .01. Note: Decimal points are deleted. Sample sizes for Studies 1, 2, and 3 are, respectively, 243, 58, and 55.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Our framework was conceived from the nexus of qualitative and quantitative research, the extant literature, and our experience as social and behavioral scientists, all elements that are important for the development of program theory (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). Our study provides substantive information about how these sustainability elements are linked to middle range program results, in this case meeting the needs of at risk children, youth, and families, the sustainability planning process, and the degree of confidence in program survival. We first note that the correlations are modest though statistically significant. Even though the correlation magnitude is less than desired, the direction of the coefficients is consistent with expectations. To varying degrees among these samples of respondents, and for the programs that they are reporting on, all dimensions of sustainability are important for accomplishing primary program goals involving meeting needs of at risk families, and in an expected direction. The relationships between the sustainability elements and the sustainability planning process measure were also in the expected direction. This finding is consistent with our advice to program professionals that suggests the significance of early sustainability planning for program success. We also expected that the sustainability

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elements would covery positively with having confidence in the future of the program. This expectation was also supported.

Generally speaking, across the studies, leadership competence and understanding the community are most consistently related to the middle range program results, followed by demonstrating program results, strategic funding, and staff involvement and integration. Effective collaboration and program responsivity are related substantially less. More specifically, if we look at which sustainability elements are more important for meeting needs of at risk families, it appears that understanding the community, demonstrating program results, and staff involvement are more consistently related; for planning for sustainability, it appears that leadership competence and understanding the community are more important; and for having confidence in project survival, it appears that leadership competence, strategic funding, and staff involvement and integration are more consistently related.

From Theory and Research to Professional Practice

For program professionals the findings of this study suggest a roadmap for being intentional about sustainability efforts by virtue of the development and implementation of a sustainability plan. The need for intentionality is particularly important in light of research that discusses how early sustainability planning is in itself an important step towards sustaining programs (Goodman & Steckler, 1987-88; Laken & Hutchins, 1995; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998) and the research that argues the need for being ethically responsible to continue programs once they are started, particularly for those in the neediest communities (Akerlund, 2000; Goodman & Steckler, 1987-88). These sustainability elements provide not only important information about what and who is necessary for sustaining programs but also the means for program leaders, staff, and other key stakeholders to work together in the development of a sustainability plan. The major benefit for program professionals in focusing on sustainability elements is that they become focal points for program teams to develop, implement, and monitor a sustainability plan. Key stakeholders can be brought together to focus discussions on critical aspects of sustainability which then determines what mechanisms should be activated as programs are being developed, implemented, and monitored. We have discovered that each of these sustainability elements is important in education and training on program sustainability (Marek & Mancini, 2001).

Developing a sustainability plan is an entry-level activity rather than an endpoint. Once a program is implemented, the sustainability elements can be used to monitor program supports and to continue to gauge sustainability itself. Using our framework as a monitoring tool helps to continually appraise and prioritize the sustainability process, including strengths and gaps. Intentional efforts toward sustaining programs are dynamic and evolving, much as programming efforts are in general. Sustaining programs is a process that benefits from continual monitoring and adaptation in order to meet individual, family, program, and community needs. Findings from this three-sample study suggest that important precursors to program sustainability are substantially related to a range of sustainability elements that can be manipulated by program professionals.

Our own work with program professionals has used the Program Sustainability Index and its sustainability elements as an interactive sustainability assessment process to assist program teams in this planning (Marek & Mancini, 2001). In the trainings we have
conducted, we transposed the PSI into a program sustainability checklist and requested each team member to complete it. We have taken a type of performance indicator approach by asking workshop respondents to respond to each item by using three levels of responses in assessing their program (in effect, treating each item as a program goal and then asking if the goal is “Fully,” “Somewhat/partially,” or “Barely/not at all” met). After this individual assessment is completed, team members share their own perceptions of how their program is responding to each of the elements (based on the items for each element). Workshop attendees have reported that although they may have spoken of the need to sustain their programming efforts, they never did so in as specified and detailed way as they did using the PSI. This process allows the team to reach consensus on their key gaps of sustainability efforts and then decide, as a group, what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, how it will be done, and who will be doing what to intentionally plan for and implement a sustainability plan. Through asking and answering these questions, the framework of a sustainability action plan emerges. For example, if we consider items related to effective collaboration, a program team may find that they have not yet included local decision-makers or representatives from all appropriate community services agencies. By determining this gap, discussion ensues as to who would be appropriate to include on the program team, how will they be approached and invited to participate, who will do so, and when will this occur. Findings from the current analysis suggest that middle range program results are affected by sustainability elements, which can be objectives of training at the community level.

References


